

The New Covenant (2 Cor.2:14-3:18 and Jer.31:31-34)
Christ in us, the hope of glory (Graham Cousins)
Sunday Evening 1 June 2008

You pick up your Bible, and the first thing you notice is that it has 2 sections - the Old Testament, and the New Testament. We're so used to it that we probably don't stop to think what it means. But it actually highlights for us something so important about our relationship with God. We are New Testament people, we live in a new relationship with God - based on the new covenant God made with his people through Jesus. And - we are all called to be ministers in that new covenant.

So - what is this relationship that God has made with us? What does it mean to be the New Testament people of God? What does it mean for you and for me to be ministers of the new covenant - serving God by serving his people?

If you've been here over the past 3 weeks, you'll know that we've already seen that Christian ministry involves pressure, comfort, and hope. We've seen that it involves integrity. We've seen that it involves forgiveness. As we come to the next section of this letter, let's pray that God will help each of us understand something new about his calling to us as ministers of the gospel here in Moreton.

PRAY

READING 1 - 2 Cor.2:14-3:18

So what was Paul's ministry (and ours) about? First - it involves a message of life and death.

It seems clear from what Paul says in this letter that he was under attack. Not physically, though of course that often was the case for him. But in Corinth he was under attack from false teachers who had come into the church, and who were running Paul down. That might not have mattered to Paul - except that in criticising him they were criticising the gospel which Paul had been preaching - and Paul knew that the gospel was so important that he had to defend it - and if that meant he had to defend himself, then he would.

I guess that when we think of Paul we have in mind this towering figure - the great apostle who wrote most of the New Testament and who travelled the world preaching the gospel and founding churches wherever he went.

But the reality on the ground was a bit different. In 2 Cor. 10 Paul says that some say 'His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing.' So Paul probably wasn't an impressive looking individual, he almost certainly suffered from problems with his eyes, he wasn't even a great speaker. And in the eyes of these false teachers, that made him an easy target.

But also - Paul didn't always gain a lot of converts. And, he was constantly being persecuted. You can imagine these false teachers coming along and saying - 'If Paul really was an apostle, surely he would be more successful.'

Humanly speaking, Paul didn't seem to have much going for him. But he knew that there was a much more important perspective on his ministry: But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ. Yes - humanly speaking Paul's ministry CV might not look impressive, and neither might ours, but on the cross Jesus had triumphed over sin and death, and so as long as Paul was following Jesus, he was part of that triumphal procession. But that didn't mean that everything would be humanly speaking triumphant.

And it didn't mean that everyone would enthusiastically receive the gospel Paul was preaching. The gospel is a great divider of people, and I'm afraid that means that the gospel minister is a great divider of people. That's what Paul says here: But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one, we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life.

The gospel is good news - it is incredibly good news. But - the gospel is also bad news. Jesus died for our sins, and rose again, and is now Lord of heaven and earth. To those who accept him - Jesus is Saviour and Lord, and that is such good news. But to those who don't accept him Jesus is still Lord - but they are in rebellion against him. The same message for one person is the door to life, and to the other is the sentence of death.

And you can't separate the message from the messenger. You might be thinking - that just applies to those who are clearly evangelists - and I'm not one of them. But we are all living messages: Francis of Assisi is supposed to have said, 'Preach the gospel at all times, use words if you must.' Our whole lives as Christians should be a witness to who Jesus is and what he has done. We should be different from the society around us.

And to someone who sees that you are different, that you have a love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and so on that the world doesn't have, and who through your witness comes to hear the gospel, and receive it, then you will have their gratitude for ever. But to someone who sees that you are different, but who still rejects the gospel, you will just be a bigot who is just trying to force your belief down their throat. Same message, same messenger, but what different reactions.

And that's why faithful gospel ministry will always result in persecution - because those for whom it is the message of death will attack the messenger. It was true for Paul, it was true for the other apostles - remember that according to tradition 10 or the 11 were martyred. It's been the experience through history, and it still is today. Faithful gospel ministry will make you unpopular.

So why bother! Because of the second thing Paul tells us here - that it is through that gospel ministry that the Holy Spirit is at work.

When God brought the Israelite slaves out of Egypt, and made them his own people, he gave them the law. Moses went up Mount Sinai, and God wrote the words of the 10 commandments on 2 stone tablets. And that was something marvellous - when Moses came down from the mountain his face shone, and when he came to Aaron and the other Israelites they were afraid to come near him.

It was a wonderful thing to have the law - it meant that God's people could know how to live in order to please him. But, of course, there was a problem. They might know how to please him, but that didn't mean they could actually do it. The law set a standard for God's people, and it was a high standard - but it didn't give them the power to live up to it. And so the law ended up condemning God's people. But that wasn't God's last word.

READING 2 - Jeremiah 31:31-34

What a great promise. The time would come when instead of having the law written on stone, and being unable to keep it, the law would be written on the hearts of God's people. What does Paul say - the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Who are the hardest people to convince of the gospel? In my experience, it is decent, upright, moral people - people who think that they are good. People who think that they keep the rules, and so God will be happy with them. It was like that in Jesus' time - his harshest opponents were always the Pharisees, and it is the same today.

And I think that is what Paul was getting at here. The Jews had the law - and many of them prided themselves on their attempts to keep it. Just as many people do today. Of course, if you read the OT law properly, and took it seriously, you would know that you couldn't keep it - the bar was set too high. But people have always had an amazing capacity for self-deception, for thinking that they are better than they really are. And, of course, if you have confidence in your own goodness, you don't think that you need Jesus.

All of that combines to say that the letter kills. The OT law is not enough to give you life - in fact just the opposite. The law becomes something that can only condemn you, because you can't keep it, and thinking that you can is just self-delusion. But there is another way: The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. When you realise that despite your best efforts, you are a sinner, and then turn to the Lord in repentance and faith, the Holy Spirit lives in you, and gives you new life. That's actually what marks you as a Christian - the Holy Spirit lives in you - it's impossible to be a Christian who

doesn't have the Spirit - it's a contradiction in terms. You turn in faith to the Lord, and his Spirit gives you new life - eternal life. The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

And that, of course, is why Paul put up with suffering and persecution, it's why he was so determined not to allow anyone to pervert the gospel. Because any other message would lead people away from their only hope. And that is why we need to go on being witnesses to Jesus, pointing others to him, telling others about him when we get the chance. Even if it does mean that people who are confident of their own goodness attack us for daring to say that they need to be saved. The gospel does divide - but we need to do whatever we can to commend the truth to people, so that they can move from death, to life.

So - our ministry is a matter of life and death. The gospel is the way in which the Spirit gives life. But if that is right - if the law just leads people to eternal death - then why did God give it in the first place?

From the time that it was first given, the law was an important part of God's plan. Remember - when Moses was given the law, and he came down from Sinai, his face was glowing - Paul says in 3:7, the ministry that brought death, and which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory. So the law really was something special, something for God's people to celebrate.

But the law was always temporary - it was something that was fading. It always pointed forwards to something else - the something that Jeremiah wrote about, the new covenant. In Galatians 3:24, Paul says that the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. The whole purpose of the law was to make people realise that they were not able to please God - the demands of the law were too high. And so instead of trying to please God in their own strength, they would turn to the Lord Jesus.

So if the law pointed people to Jesus - it was a great thing. But, of course, not as great as what it was pointing to: Now if the ministry that brought death, and which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious.And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts. You see, the great thing is that salvation through Jesus isn't a temporary thing. It isn't pointing towards something else which later on we will have to accept. Jesus is God's last word, and faith in him is all that ever will be needed.

And that means that if we have turned to Christ, if his Spirit lives in us, then we can come into God's presence at any time. Those who do not know Jesus

are cut off from God; Paul talks about the Jews being unable to know God, to hear God's word, because their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. But whenever one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. There is no longer any barrier between me and God, there is no longer anything stopping me from knowing him as my Father. Because his Spirit lives in me, I am free to come to him at any time.

I think that's what Paul means when he says, where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. I am free to come before God, free to hear him speak through his word, free love and obey him.

So - our ministry is about a message of life and death, about life through the Spirit rather than through our own efforts, about something that will last forever, rather than something that is temporary.

And finally - it is about lives transformed here and now. It is all too easy to think of the gospel as being about how to get to heaven when you die, and of course that is pretty important. But it also has an impact on your life here and now - or at least it should do. The Holy Spirit is the one who marks us out as God's people, the one who breathes life into us. But that new life should be changing us now. V.18 - And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect (contemplate) the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. As we focus our eyes on the Lord Jesus, as we study his word, as we spend time worshipping him - we are becoming more like him.

What a great thing. No way can I make myself more like Jesus - but as I spend time with him, the Holy Spirit does that for me. I can't make myself loving - but as I focus on Jesus, the Spirit makes me more loving. I can't make myself joyful, but as I spend time with Jesus, his Spirit gives me joy. I can't make myself self-controlled - but as I devote myself to Jesus - the Spirit gives me the self-control I know I lack. How good is that?

Of course, there's a flip side. If I am not spending time contemplating the Lord's glory, as Paul puts it, I'm never going to be transformed. And that is a big challenge in our busy-ness obsessed society.

Therefore, since we have this hope, we are very bold. I'm not by nature a bold person - I'm naturally very timid. But when I think of what God has done for me, when I grasp what he has entrusted to me, when I realise that he wants to be at work in me and through me by his Spirit - well, even someone like me has reason to be bold. And so do you.